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Building a safer, less congested future

By Bill Peacock
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Texans went to the polls yesterday to decide whether to take \$1.7 billion a year out the state's savings account to build more roads, while Austinites decided if they want to go \$600 million into debt to build a 9.5 mile, \$1.4 billion light-rail line.

Both choices presented to voters reflect an outdated approach to transportation — hardly the direction a city and state poised to become 21st century leaders should be heading.

Last year, 3,377 people were killed while traveling on Texas roads, more than died from either homicide, breast cancer or non-traffic injuries.

Re-adopting 19th century rail technology isn't going to change this — or reduce congestion. By the 1940s, Austin and other Texas cities had eliminated trolley lines — the urban rail of the day — and replaced them with buses, which are less expensive, more flexible in their routes, and thus can carry more passengers than rail. Today, though, Austin wants to stand athwart history by spending billions of dollars to replace buses with rail rather than investing in ways to reduce congestion and make roads safer.

At least the choice that was before Texas voters might actually reduce congestion by building more roads. But those simply calling for \$5 billion per year of increased spending on concrete and engineers without reform still represent 20th century thinking that ignores the great advances in transportation technology that are already appearing today.

Most of us have cars that can control our speed or tell us when other cars or objects are too close. Some cars can already drive with little help, and within a decade these cars should be available on the market. In 20 years or so, fully autonomous cars will be making their appearance.

Many may see such claims as fantasy. But the same rapid pace saw the adoption of cars go from zero to 60 from 1895 to 1915. The same is true for personal computers from 1975 to 1995. The adoption of new technology often surprises us, yet before we know it, it becomes the new normal.

The new normal for transportation will change our lives dramatically. Cars will travel down highways at high speeds within a few feet of each other, greatly reducing congestion even during rush hour. Traffic lights for cars will disappear — computers won't need them. One hour commutes will drop to 30 minutes, with the “driver” being able to read emails or reports on the

way. More importantly, deaths at the hands of drivers — including drunken drivers — will rapidly diminish.

All of this requires new investment, though, which means that we need to change our spending habits to pave the way for this future. Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute recommends that we eliminate funding for rail projects; end centralized, long-range transportation planning; and stop efforts by the government to mandate new technologies in cars.

Instead, Texas should “cooperate in the development and use of consistent road striping, sign, signal, and similar standards that can be read by autonomous vehicles.” Additionally, the Texas Department of Transportation should turn road design and building over to the private sector and focus on directing state transportation funds toward this future.

We are not finished building new roads. But Texas' roads of the future will be far safer and move traffic far more efficiently if we are willing to change our ways and let market-based advances lead the way.